JESUS THE MAN
MARK 1:9-15
15:16-20
16: 1-8

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It's really a rather simple story. From the standpoint of pure objectivity it might sound something like this. Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph the Carpenter, when he was about thirty years of age stepped into the waters of the Jordan River and was baptised by a strange man named John, who - it is reported was a distant relative. Many others were responding to John's call to repentance and cleansing by being baptised, but for Jesus of Nazareth it appears to be the turning point in his life, which heretofore was not noticeably different from any other young man of Nazareth. After his baptism experience this Jesus spent some time in the dessert contemplating his future. He next chose a small group of men to be his helpers and traveling companions - and called them his disciples. With his small entourage in tow he commenced to travel about Galilea - a Northern sector of Palestine, teaching, preaching and healing.

The essence of his teaching seems to have been a probing beneath the accepted ethical norms as set out in Jewish law. The law said that killing was wrong, but this man dug beneath the word of the law and suggested that its spirit and intent made anger with one's brother also a matter of moral concern. On the positive side he redefined morality in terms of an active, specific serving of one's brother. He suggested that a man could obey the law competely and still be a sinner - until he learned to love other men in a very concrete way.

The essence of his preaching was that the Kingdom of God was now present in the life of the world. This proclaimation needs to be understood in light of the religious faith of his people which was that God would one day intercede in human history in the person of the Messiah. Jesus said that this long-awaited event had happened. Some people thought he was claiming the messianic title for himself. Sometimes he discouraged that kind of thinking: at other times he seemed to have gone out of his way to encourage it.

Throughout this Galilean period he was known also as a healer. Wherever

he went the blind saw, the lame walked, the disturbed found peace.

An important part of the story is the opposition he encountered from the very beginning. Everytime he taught, preached or healed there seems to have been representatives of the religious establishment present to challenge him and argue with him. He presented a distinct threat to the religious status quo, and the story is incomplete apart from this deep and increasingly intense conflict he had with the important men of his time. In Galilea, however, this opposition took the form of harrasement by Pharisees and Scribes - and it presented only an occassional threat to his safety.

But then he decided to go South into Palestine - to the city of Juresalem itself. He chose the first day of Passover week to enter the city and the story of that week occupies nearly half of the record. In Jerusalem the opposition to him had power. While in Galilea the Scribes and Pharisees might not like what he was saying, in Jerusalem they had access to the judicial power of Rome. And so the earlier conflict was repeated, this time in the Capital City: this time magnified by the fact that Jerusalem was the religious and political and social center of the nation. And in five short days the religious authorities managed to convince the Roman political authorities that this Jesus was a distinct threat to them as well. A frantic procession of hearings and trials was hastily arranged with the Romans trying not to get involved in what they regarded as an internal religious squabble among their Jewish subjects. Finally, a minor politician by the name of Pontius Pilate gave in to intense pressure and ordered him executed This was done on the day before the Sabbath along with the routine execution of other criminals, on a hill outside the city, near the garbage dump. The official charge seems to have been treason, although everyone knew that his real offense was blasphemy, a religious crime that really didn't impress the Romans.

In any case, when the soldiers responsible for executions were convinced that he was dead, they took him down from the cross, gave the body to one of his friends, who prepared it and buried in his own private tomb.

That's the story, objectively stated. Of course his followers claimed that he rose from his grave: that he appeared to them: and several weeks later they surfaced in Jerusalem with the asserting that he was the Messiah - and the hsitory of mankind has never been the same since.

It's a simple story really, shorn of tradition and interpretation and theological conviction. And I think every now and then we need to do what we have just done: go back and look at it, in its simplicity. Because that story plays such a decisive role in who we are, and where we are that it is virtually impossible to contemplate the last 2,000 years of history without it. That came home to me on two successive evenings last week. On Wednesday evening the officers of the church saw pictures and heard the story of the Church of Scotland a story that begins around the third century A.D. And even though I am somewhat familiar with the story, I was impressed again with the fact that apart from Christianity - there is no history of Scotland. The wars, the struggles, the fantastic amount of blood shed, the evolution of the Goreenvital institutions, education, culture - all of revolves around Christianity - and behind that, the simple story of Jesus of Nazareth. The next evening I sat in Elliot Hall of Music for one of the most remarkable musical events I have ever experienced. Virgil Fox, superb organist played the music of J. S. Bach for two hours and twenty minutes, accompanied by a very sophisticated psychedelic lighting display. And in between the musical presentations he talked about Bach in a way that would put a hell-fire and brimstone preacher to shame. What he really was talking about was the religious faith of the composer - and when the evening was finally over the audience had heard the Gospel: when Fox explained Bach's theology and then played "Come Sweet Death", it was a remarkably intense moment. He received standing ovations: he played four encores: the audience was responding in a way I assumed was reserved for the Rolling Stones. And it was impossible to listen to that music without knowing and feeling that it too depends on the simple story of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now let's talk about the Clinker in the story. For the uninitiated, a

"clinker" is a piece of coal, so impure that it doesn't burn completely, which then lodges in the grates of the furnace and makes it impossible to shake the ashes out of the fire box. Some of my more exciting childhood memories have to do with my father extracting clinkers from the furnace. In any case, the clinker in the simple little story of Jesus of Nazareth is the non=objective assertion of the Church that the story of Jesus is really the story of Almighty God: that it wasn't just a carpenters' son that taught, preached, healed and got executed, it was God himself: that the subject of the story - Jesus of Nazareth- was in fact Jesus the Christ, God incarnate - God in the flesh. Suddenly the simple story is not so simple. Suddenly it becomes the most important story ever told. Suddenly everything its subject said and did takes on new significance.

And so we begin this morning a Lenten series of sermons, in which I hope we can go back and turn the soil over again - by looking at the story - and the man. In subsequent weeks we shall be thinking about Jesus, the teacher, the healer, the savior, the offender, the Lord. But today, in the time remaining, Jesus the man.

The Church, since the early centuries, has held that the truth about Jesus is expressed in two separate and quite opposite statements. Jesus was fully God and Jesus was fully man. That's called a paradox: it doesn't fit logically: it cannot be explained nationally. But the church has stubbornly maintained that to eliminate the paradox - to emphasize one of the assertions at the expense of the other is to miss the truth altogether.

In times past one or the other has been the focus of the church's theology. In certain periods of history the divinity of Christ has been emphasized to the degree that his humanity was forgotten. Likewise the reverse has happened as well. It's very tempting, because if we elliminate the paradox we are then able to understand. We can handle the assertion that Jesus was God - just pretending to be a man: or that he was a great man who taught us a lot of good things about God. But the doctrine of the incarnation is that he was both - at the same time.

I have the feeling that the real temptations for us is not so much to

swing the pendulum in one direction or the other, as it is to leave it dangling in the middle: failing to take either assertion very seriously. The result is a "Sunday School Jesus" who is neither God nor a man but something in between. We have real trouble regarding Jesus as God - praying to Jesus, for instance: and at the same time I sense that we are most uncomfortable with him as a man - like us in every way. And so we create our own Jesus - the sentimentalized, slightly effeminate creature in a long white robe, immortalized in Salman's "Head of Christ": the Jesus Robert Clyde Johnson calls "velvety".

My assumption is that we must know him first as a man: that we must learn to be comfortable with his humanity: that we must learn to affirm his commoness with us. My assumption is that true commitment to him happens when we know that our Lord was a flesh and blood human being. that he knew what it means to suffer, that he hurt physically, that he bled emotionally: that he didn't want to die: that he loved his friends: that he got discouraged and angry: that he laughed and wept: that the prospect of getting nailed to a cross did the same thing to him that it would do to you or me.

We are being helped today to rediscover the manhood of Jesus by our own culture. Jesus has suddenly become a hero. He's on the news: he's on Broadway: on records and tapes. The young - and God bless them for this - have discovered something the Church may have forgotten: namely that the man Jesus is a very interesting and intriguing person: that his story - all by itself- is a great and inspiring story: that if you're looking for a hero - a model you can do worse than Jesus of Nazareth.

Whatever else you want to say about Jesus Christ Superstar Jesus comes through as a man, a real, flesh and blood man. And it is not insignificant that more people have heard and been moved by "I Don't Know How to Love Him", than are ever going to hear "Stand Up, Stand Up, For Jesus". The story of Jesus the man - whenever it is honestly told, - is far more compelling - than the insipid Sunday School Jesus that most of us found in the church.

My assumption is that we need to affirm his humanity - in order to experience

his Lordship. And I should like, in conclusion, to share with you the three aspects of his humanity that speak most intimately to me as a man and which I find most compelling about him as a man. When I see them in him I am moved to feel good about who I am - because I know I can be that kind of man as well. At the same time, to see them in him is to know that I never am all that I could be - all that he was - all that he calls me to be.

First - freedom. In the very best sense of the word Jesus was a free man. When I think of the ways we are not free, the ways we fall into all kinds of slavery - slavery to success, slavery to accomplish, and slavery to our bank accounts, slavery to the image we hope to project, I realize that here at least was one man who made it. Here was one man unrestricted by all the self-imposed shackles we insist on wearing. Yet, in a special way, a way we have trouble understanding - he became a slave - a slave of God's will, an obedient man: a man who gave it all away because of what he believed.

Second - honesty. I perceive in Jesus of Nazareth the most honest man who ever lived. He saw hypocricy in the lives of religious people: he saw phoniness in the behavior of respectable people: he saw dignity in the down - trodden. And when I contemplate the comprómises you and I make every day, the little dishonesties we have come to regard as necessary, this man motivates me to scrutinize my own life very carefully.

Third - compassion. Somehow you and I have been conditioned to look at starving people, refugees of war, victims of racism and poverty - and feel nothing. Somehow we have been conditioned to hear about the tons of bombs being dropped over Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia without even thinking about the torn bodies of little children and old men. In Jesus of Nazareth I see a man who felt compassion: who could not resist the urge to pick up a little child; who hurt inside at the rampant obscenity of leprosy: who wept when he sensed the grief of a young widow: who felt - in himself- the emotional hurts inflicted on the poor - the outcasts - the lonely.

There are many more, of course. But for me, these three are compelling

aspects of the man that I cannot forget.

As Christians we believe - in whatever words you wish to use - that he was God in our midst. Let us not forget that he was man in our midst as well: man as God created everyone of us to be. And so as we proceed through this Lenten season - let us discover him again as our savior - our Lord - our Redeemer - but let us begin on this day - with his humanity. For he is Jesus our brother: Jesus the Man. AMEN

Father, we are grateful that in Jesus you have shown us what you intended in your creation. Forgive us when we fall short: and help us to see in him - what you want us to be AMEN